

By Joel Haber

Upon entering Valero restaurant, near Machane Yehuda Market, one immediately feels this will not be the usual Jerusalem kosher dining experience. The interior design is strikingly eclectic, combining richly detailed neo-Baroque flowered walls, a classic black-and-white checkerboard floor, art deco-inspired mirrors, and muted beige half-curtains that keep out the visual noise of Agrippas Street. A cinematic belly dancer surveys it all from the monumental photo hanging on the wall.

Individual details of the atypical décor jump out next.

Some create continuity between the disparate design elements. The flower pattern creatively climbs off of the walls, painted onto parts of the belly dancer photo and its frame. The checkerboard floor repeats in the photograph itself, and in black-and-white diamonds covering the tables.

Other details, however, work against the whole. The main dining area sits on a slightly raised wood plank platform floor. And while this separates the space into distinctive sections, the step is mildly obtrusive and the wood floor feels uninspired. The mirrors which hide lighting fixtures feel slightly kitschy and out of place. These aspects don't destroy the overall feel of the restaurant, but they do negatively impact the experience.

Consciously or not, designer Gilad Zaffrany has perfectly paralleled the Valero dining experience.

The menu presents an eclectic mix of foods, each highlighting an attention to flavor, texture and presentation. Like the checkerboard floor, culinary through-lines tie together many of the courses over a full meal. It is in the details, however, where each dish succeeds or fails. As with a jazz musician's improvisation, the excitement comes from the tension between chef and advisor Aviv Moshe's potential failure and brilliant success. Even the attempts that fall short remain entertaining.

A simple example is the restaurant's signature Sour Candy Strip cocktail (48 NIS). Colorful, playful and visually striking, the drink mixes some mild fruit juices onto a vodka base, topping it with bright sour-candy gummy strips. While the concept injects a dose of childhood fun into an adult beverage, unfortunately the beverage's flavors remain bland and uninspired. Such an exciting detail would have been more successful in a drink that complemented and balanced it. Instead it just feels gimmicky.

Valero's menu options change regularly, taking advantage of the seasonal foods in the shuk nearby. And much as its name recalls the family who owned the empty lot on which Machane Yehuda Market began organically, the restaurant's ingredients also highlight various old-school Jerusalem foods. It will be interesting to see how different the menu becomes in the summer; the current flavors are rich and powerful, which work well with the winter season we are now leaving.

For example, the goose liver appetizer (96 NIS) welcomes a rozata popsicle alongside, recalling the Libyan/Tunisian almond drink sipped by the shuk's old merchants. The toasted almonds surrounding the

liver balance its creamy texture while also picking up the sweet ice pop's underlying flavor, but altering it slightly.

Other dishes include classic local elements like amba, techina, silan, and harissa. At the same time, the menu doesn't feel particularly Yerushalmi or even market-influenced. And many of the aforementioned ingredients are only noticeable on the menu, not in the food itself.

Unlike the rozata popsicle, for example, the dates in the same goose liver dish practically disappear. Toasted Jerusalem bagel slices that accompany the sweetbread appetizer (74 NIS) are indistinguishable from any other small toast or crostini.

The sweetbreads themselves disappear in a richly sweet-savory sauce, and the larger (and unremarkable) beef tortellini that surround them. While the sauce is indeed delicious, it shouldn't be the highlight of the dish.

Valero's veal carpaccio (82 NIS) is an even more confused appetizer, paired with enoki mushrooms, crispy gnocchi and slivers of grilled goose liver. While visually appealing, the disparate elements have no connection to each other. The carpaccio itself is adequate, but lacks flavor, such as the traditional lemon, salt and pepper.

By far, however, the salmon tartare (58 NIS) is the best offering of the appetizer course. Visually appealing on the plate with bold swaths of colorful sauces and small heaps of crunchy nuts, the flavors and textures of the dish also work excellently together. Tender salmon, resting on crispy Japanese radish slices, plays well against the nuts, light amba-flavored soy cream and an outstanding tom yum sauce that supplies the perfect amount of spicy heat. Mint leaf garnish provides a refreshing balance to the dominant flavors of the fish and tom yum.

Like the tom yum and the sweetbreads base, the sauces at Valero are almost universally delicious. Another prominent example is in the duet of truffle-celery cream and vanilla merlot reduction that accompanies the Tournedos Rossini entrée (198 NIS). Each offers bold enough taste to stand up to the fillet's strong flavor, while also providing alternative earthy and acidic notes. The meat comes with an equal sized piece of goose liver (they *really* like their goose liver at Valero), which by itself seems too large for this meat medallion. But the dish really shines when the elements are consumed together. Though the fillet on its own can seem slightly overcooked, when paired with a bite of the liver and the two sauces the meat really sings.

Sauce again is the most obvious element for the rib steak (146 NIS); unfortunately, however, it is outstanding because it is missing. Serving the steak at a tender medium (though even slightly rarer would work better for this meat), the chefs have rightly decided to let the meat speak for itself. But minimalist and lacking are not synonymous, and this meat cries out for some kind of sauce. The techina that comes with it is better for the small side salad, and the single clove of garlic confit sitting on top cannot actually be called an accompaniment.

Despite the lack of sauce, the steak dish features a truly incredible side dish of potato chunks. Smashed whole potatoes whose crisp exteriors embrace the most tender and flavorful interior, these highlight straight-up cooking ability. The most impressive skill in the kitchen can often be a deftness of hand at the simple things, more than creative flavor combinations or exotic preparation techniques. These potatoes could easily stand up against any other in the city.

That same cooking skill steps forward in the tastiest main course: risotto with truffles and mushroom ragu (76 NIS). Packed with intense flavor, the dish becomes even more impressive in light of the fact that it is vegan. During Valero's "soft open" about a half a year ago, it featured a non-kosher menu with both meat and dairy menu items. Within the first month, the restaurant closed, koshered the kitchen, and reopened with kosher supervision. One wonders how different this risotto would have been in its prior iteration. But its current creamy texture doesn't miss the lack of butter, and even the soy "parmesan" topping is flavorful. Furthermore, comparing the strong truffle tone here with the much more subtle (but still noticeable) truffle presence in the Tournedos Rossini, one sees how much the chef understands his ingredients.

The restaurant currently offers three desserts, the most "Israeli" of which is a Halva Trio (52 NIS), combining a techina-silan-pecan freeze with halva ice cream and hairs of halva. Though basically using the same ingredients, the three elements showcase different flavors and textures and work very pleasantly together, once more displaying the chef's skills.

With all this being said, it is notable that the most remarkable dishes at Valero are a fish-based appetizer and a vegan main course – not what one might expect from an upmarket kosher meat restaurant. Furthermore, when the most impressive elements are the potatoes, an almond drink popsicle and the many amazing sauces, the peculiarity of the restaurant becomes even clearer.

But with some highly successful dishes, and many others that are at least interesting, the Valero dining experience will be a satisfying and enjoyable one. And when a specific element does surprise you with its brilliance, you'll appreciate it all the more for its contrast.

Just like when you first notice the flowers painted onto the picture on the wall. It's all about the details.

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Valero  
Agrippas 80  
02-546-5650